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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 001593

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 4/19/2017
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SUBJECT: CHIRAC'S ENDGAME IN LEBANON

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary/comment: President Chirac does not believe Russia will veto a UNSCR to establish the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, according to Chirac's Middle East advisor, Dominique Boche. Although the Russians have not yet proposed any quid pro quo for their support or abstention, the French will likely resist any Russian pressure to engage in horse-trading (Boche said he saw "no equivalency" between the Special Tribunal and Kosovo, for example). Though Chirac recognizes that he is unlikely to see a Chapter VII resolution passed before he leaves office on May 16, he is confident that once the UNSCR ball is rolling, his successor will have no choice but to follow through. Chirac is therefore racing against the clock, not only against Syria and his allies, but also against some in his own Foreign Ministry. While one would expect the Elysee to be in high gear on Lebanon, we sensed little urgency -- or energy -- from Boche. End summary/comment.

Edging Closer to Chapter VII

12. (C) PolMC and NEA Watcher met April 18 with Dominique Boche, President Chirac's advisor on the Middle East, to discuss the Elysee's thinking on Chapter VII. Boche noted that an April 17 meeting between Lebanese PM Siniora and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri "was not positive at all," and would provide further evidence to UN Legal Advisor Nicolas Michel that the Lebanese opposition had no intention of ending the blockage of the tribunal. Though the French are nominally waiting for Michel to report back to the SYG, they expect to quickly move to the next stage (i.e., the introduction of a draft UNSCR). The French do not believe Siniora will be in a position to send a second letter to the UN following Michel's visit, and believe that he has already given the UNSC sufficient grounds for action.

Elysee Expects Russians to Play for Time

13. (C) With regard to the Russians, Boche claimed that Russian DFM Sultonov's visit has shown Moscow that an internal Lebanese resolution of the Tribunal question is not in the cards. Despite having tried twice without success to pin Putin down on the question of establishing the Special Tribunal via a Chapter VII resolution, Chirac is convinced that Putin will ultimately not veto such a resolution. On the other hand, Boche thought it unlikely that Russia would go so far as to actually support a Chapter VII resolution; he predicted that the Russians would seek to delay a vote as long as possible, and seemed to anticipate (although he did not expressly say so) a Russian abstention in the end. Boche said the Russians had not yet attempted to extract a quid pro

quo from the French, although he thought it likely Moscow would try to do so at some point. However, Boche indicated that the French will likely resist any such effort, adding that he saw no "equivalency" between the Special Tribunal and, for example, Kosovo.

¶4. (C) As for the other UNSC members, Chirac believes that he has succeeded in convincing South African President Mbeke that there is no alternative to a Chapter VII resolution. (Chirac said as much to Egyptian President Mubarak on April 16, but the Egyptian Embassy here believes that Mbeke was merely being polite.) In contrast, the French are less optimistic about budging the Qataris. Indeed, Boche expressed incomprehension of Qatar's opposition to the Tribunal, coupled with alarm at the "dangerous and worrisome contradictions" in Qatar's broader foreign policy. (His concern was shared by the MFA's Herve Besancenot, DAS-equivalent for the Levant, who described Qatar as an "unguided missile.")

Working the Saudis and Egyptians

¶5. (C) Boche observed the need for a vigorous diplomatic campaign to "mobilize the moderate Arab states," such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Somewhat incongruously, he then confessed that there had been little direct engagement between the Elysee and the Saudis since the conclusion of the Riyadh Summit. "We haven't been quick to pick up the phone," Boche admitted, saying that Chirac was vexed by the warm reception given to Bashar al-Asad in Riyadh. However, AFP reports today (April 19) that Chirac phoned the Saudi king on April 18 to say that the UNSC would need to "assume its responsibilities in light of the recommendations from Nicolas Michel upon the conclusion of his mission."

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¶6. (C) Chirac took advantage of his meeting with Mubarak earlier this week to press for Egyptian support. Mubarak demurred, saying that the quest for justice had to be balanced against the need to preserve Lebanon's stability. Chirac pushed back, arguing that a failure to establish the Special Tribunal would only encourage further assassinations and thus breed more instability. The Quai assesses that Mubarak is largely indifferent to the Tribunal's establishment.

Mapping Chirac's Endgame

¶7. (C) Boche estimated (and multiple sources at the Quai concur) that there is too little time left in Chirac's presidency to see a Chapter VII resolution passed before Chirac leaves the Elysee. Chirac's goal, therefore, is to advance the process far enough that his successor, whatever his or her personal inclination, will be unable to reverse course. Boche said he was particularly confident that Nicolas Sarkozy, if elected, would see the Tribunal established. (In fact, Boche predicted -- based on an interview that Sarkozy gave to a Lebanese weekly -- that the UMP leader would be even tougher on Hizballah than Chirac has been.)

Comment: The Clock is Ticking

¶8. (S) Comment: The race is on to see whether Chirac can get France far enough down the Chapter VII path as to make it impossible for his successor to reverse course. In doing so, he must not only contend with Syria and its proxies, but also with those at the MFA who remain stubbornly opposed to what they regard as Chirac's "obsession" with Lebanon. In a revealing comment made over lunch at the Lebanese Embassy here on April 19, an official from the MFA's IO directorate described Chapter VII as "President Chirac's policy, but not

necessarily that of France." Precisely because the Quai's resistance to Chapter VII is so well known, our contacts in the MFA's Middle East directorate are convinced that the Elysee is cutting them out of the loop by preparing a draft UNSCR without any MFA input. "You can almost smell the mutiny brewing," one of our British colleagues observed.

19. (S) In light of the above, one would expect the Elysee to be in high gear on Lebanon. But much to our surprise, we sensed little urgency -- or energy -- during our meeting with Boche. Rather, we detected a disconcerting whiff of complacency. From the vantage point of this Mission, we will never have a stronger ally on Chapter VII than Chirac, and time is working against him -- and us. Anything we can do to speed the Chapter VII process along will work to our mutual advantage.

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